

Blindness and Low Vision

Overview

The terms “blindness” and “low vision” cover a wide variety of experiences, including legal blindness, limited visual acuity, and color blindness. People with low vision, for example, have different challenges than people who are blind.

A person with low vision has some useful sight. However, low vision usually interferes with the performance of daily activities, such as reading or driving. Persons with low vision may prefer to read large print. A person with low vision may not recognize images at a distance or be able to differentiate between colors of similar hues. Those who are legally blind may only see light and dark images and may need to be inches away from objects to observe them properly.

Blind persons may use mobility aids, including canes and guide dogs. It is always best to ask the patron what you can do to assist, rather than assuming that help is needed.

Tips

- Speak in your normal tone of voice. Avoid yelling or speaking loudly to individuals with vision loss.
- Identify yourself and others with you. In a group setting, identify the person who you are addressing. Announce your comings and goings: don't leave a blind person talking to an empty chair.
- In a meeting, identify yourself when you begin speaking.
- Ask the patron, “How may I help you?”
- Speak directly to the patron, not through a sighted companion.
- Do not touch or pet a guide dog.
- When giving directions, use the clock's face as your basis: "The reference desk is about two feet ahead at three o'clock from where you're facing." Offer to escort the patron to his or her destination.
- When guiding a patron, offer your elbow for guidance. Do not grab the patron's arm or hand. Stand next to the patron and slightly ahead; then offer your arm. Describe your path, including obstacles and changes in the levels you are walking, such as stairs. If the path narrows, push your elbow back, so that the patron can walk directly behind you.
- Have material available in a variety of formats, and ask for format preferences, including large print, Braille, or audio.
- Make sure your library is well lit for persons with low vision and that signage incorporates high contrast, large print, and Braille.

Materials and Assistive Technology

- Large-print books and magazines that have a typeface greater than font size 14.
- Braille books and magazines (some with tactile graphics) available on loan from the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (see "Collection Development Resources," below).
- Combination Print/Braille picture books that sighted individuals and Braille readers can enjoy together.
- Various audiobook formats, such as CDs, downloadable audiobooks, and eBooks.
- Audio-described television programs (formatted to include a narration of events which are happening for which there isn't a dialogue) and movies on DVD.

Collection Development Resources

Electronic, Digital Format

- [Bookshare](#) is an online library that makes reading accessible for people who cannot read standard print. A registration fee is required for persons who are not students at qualified United States schools.
- [Canadian National Institute for the Blind Library](#) supported by the Canadian Institute for the Blind, the library provides books, magazines, and newspapers in French, Spanish, and other languages. The library also provides an electronic meeting place for registered patrons, as well as books in large print and Braille.
- [National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped \(NLS\)](#) is a free braille and talking book library for people with temporary or permanent low vision, blindness, or a physical disability that prevents them from reading or holding the printed page. Through a national network of cooperating libraries, NLS circulates books and magazines in braille or audio formats, delivered by postage-free mail or as instant downloads.
- [Learning Ally](#) is a national non-profit organization that provides programs and technology to help students with print disabilities, including blindness, visual impairment and dyslexia.

Print/Braille Book Resources

- [National Braille Press \(NBP\)](#) publishes low-cost braille books for children and adults.
- [Seedlings Braille Books for Children](#) produces Braille books for children and young readers.
- [Braille Institute Special Collection](#) program provides blind and visually impaired children with free braille books and storybook kits.

Resource Technology

- [American Foundation for the Blind \(AFB\)](#) provides information, resources, and technology consulting services for the purpose of improving access for blind and visually impaired Americans.
- [American Printing House for the Blind \(APH\)](#) is the world's largest nonprofit organization creating educational, workplace, and independent living products and services for people who are visually impaired.
- [Media Access Group](#) at WGBH provides instructions for audio description, as well as information about captioning and description for television shows, films, and videos.